

SESSION ONE

HOUSEKEEPING AND STRUCTURE: The aim of this class is to explore the topics of disability and Christian theology in a way that sets a theological foundation for further discussions and actions which seek to discern ways for PMC to be a place of mutual belonging for those with and without disabilities. This class will be structured in two ways: the first half may be oriented toward laying the groundwork both theologically and topically. The latter half will allow for discussion, reaction, and witness in order to create space for a variety of perspectives to be presented. A note on language: typically, person-first language as well as identity language is preferred (“person with disability,” or “disabled person”). However, in middle-upper class contexts, guarding language can prevent people from exploring matters of justice, or being honest. While language that is derogatory should not be used (at all), don’t be afraid to not know how to speak about something. This context is for learning from one another.

MYSELF: My name is Cody Bivins-Starr. I’m the administrator here at PMC, and a PhD student in Theological Ethics at University of Aberdeen. More importantly, my understanding of disability is rooted both in experience and academic life. I was raised with an elder sister with various psychiatric disabilities, a close cousin with intellectual disabilities, in college I was mentored by a dear friend with intellectual disability, worked as an assistant and community member in L’Arche Portland (an alternative community where people with and without disabilities live together), and until recently worked as a direct support professional. Though I myself am not disabled, I draw on these experiences and the witness of others in my life.

INTRODUCTION: Six percent of children are disabled. For adults, that’s 19%. For elder adults, that’s 45%. 13% percent of the U.S. population live with disability. Beyond numbers, many of us live with disabilities ourselves or love others who do. In other words, disability is a reality of human life. In the Christian context, however, many studies show that those of us with disabilities are likely not present in churches. Many find the church to be a place of unwelcome. An interesting recent study shows that families with members with disabilities long to be welcomed into the church, but churches approaching this welcome in typical ways often fall short, especially in efforts of what some call “mere inclusion.” In the study, it was found that inclusion efforts either focused too much on the presence of people with disabilities over belonging and did not allow those with disabilities to be at the forefront of such efforts. In many ways, the church mirrors the dominant Western culture as a social structure which holds to a vision of “normal” while excluding disabled people. **The basic goal of this class is to ask that initial question: why? Second, my hope for this class is to address a few basic yet significant “myths” about disability in the Christian context. Lastly, I hope that through discerning Christian theology together, we can find areas of promise. While we will discuss some complex topics, the goal is to merely start this process.**

WHAT IS DISABILITY?

The way we understand disability reveals quite a bit about what we think of others, the way society should be structured, what we think of ourselves, humanity, and ultimately even God. Often, we shy away from the word itself. Something which many might find discomfoting to admit, but unconsciously many without disabilities find the presence of people with disabilities

uncomfortable because of these unconscious notions of what life ideally looks like. Most of the time, people with disabilities are likely aware of this too. Through looks, visible discomfort, etc. In the context of the Christian church, the topic of disability asks all of us – do we really and mutually accept those in the body of Christ who do not conform to our ideals?

What is disability? **Q: when I ask that question, can we name what comes to mind when we ask what are disabilities?** Part of answering this question often reveals that mentioning what we consider disabilities in public spaces is “awkward,” or uncomfortable. Again, the point of this class is to peel back the layers as to why that is, especially in the Christian context where proper naming is a part of our tradition.

- Ex. Cerebral palsy, Down Syndrome, intellectual disability, blindness, deafness, wheelchair use, etc.
- Many who carry the label disabled disavow the label. For instance, many (not all) in the Deaf community or Autism community may not label themselves as such.
- What we say also reveals that disability might also be invisible and unassumed.

What does it tell us that there are so many different answers? Do each of these names carry the same experiences? There is no one singular thing or experience. The fact that all of these differing experiences are labeled or associated with “disability” shows us that this word is artificial, immaterial. That does not mean that the experiences it points to aren't real, but that the category attached to them very much has its own paradigm or understanding linked to it.

More likely, the word disability conjures images of its opposite, images of the ideal, of the “norm.” What we categorize as disability also simultaneously, or at the same time, reveals the assumed category of normal.

- **What comes to mind when we say “normal?”**

This is a key idea that will govern our five weeks together. If we as Christians are to think about disability and mutually participate in a community of belonging, we must understand that “normal” is a myth. Yet, it still governs so much of how we approach the topic. So, from the get-go we have to let go of the idea that most people are “normal.” The reality is, when we truly interrogate that category, most of us are in fact, NOT NORMAL. Ridding ourselves of the assumed category of normal, average, ideal, will force us to pay attention to one another and our particularities. We cannot create a community of belonging based on ideal pictures of the people present, rather, we are invited by God to participate in belonging by paying attention to one another.

The category of normal also reveals assumptions of what we think life should be like, and in particular what the Christian life should be like. When disability is approached this way, we can view others, or even ourselves, as objects of pity. Humanity is often defined as the “ability to do” and the result is that humans who do not fit the assumed “ability” are pitied. This leads us to our first model of disability:

Charity Model: This model understands people with disabilities as tragic or pitiable because they do not measure up to an ideal or norm. This model often results in the disempowerment or agency of disabled people. Here, people with disabilities are passive receivers of charity, care, and are assumed to not bring mutual gifts to the community. This view equates disability automatically with suffering.

The dominant answer to the “what is disability?” question is the medical model.

Medical Model: the medical model locates disability in the individual body, or intellect, as a lack of “proper” function. Biomedical (“life medicine”) approaches to disability understand the body in “parts,” and those parts are addressed individually. Ultimately, this model sees disability as something to be removed or cured, something that necessitates intervention onto the individual. While certainly this model can help alleviate pain, or aid us in other ways, it promotes a very idealistic image of health rooted in an individualistic notion of the human person. Health is defined ultimately as a very particular vision of “normal function,” a rather mechanical approach to human life. This model also has ties to dominant economic systems which view health as the ability to work. In many ways, the medical model informs most views of disability, even in the church. This will become apparent in how we approach theological ideas such as healing, and even eschatology (or, “the world to come”).

A more helpful model is the social model.

Social Model: The social model understands the reality that there are particular limitations, ailments, difficulties, etc. in human life, but sees disability as what happens when social structures are set up to promote an ideal physical/ideological space. In doing so, those with difference are “disabled” in that the social structure prevents their full participation. This model, popularized by disability rights and disability studies, acknowledges the oppressive conditions which structure themselves in a way which disables people who fall out of the myth of the norm. While this model helps us to see the social picture, it does not fully teach us a life of mutuality. However, this model can also aid us in addressing theological and communal barriers to that mutuality.

Theologically, I want to explore with you what it looks like to recognize the work of Christ in our midst, not by conforming others to a “norming” or “abled” image but finding ways to pay close attention to one another in a community of mutual belonging. We know Christ is at work when our visions of normalcy are challenged for what they are.

For the next few weeks, we will be reading Scripture together, discussing the core theological traditions of Christianity, and interrogating our senses from the lens of disability. We will address topics and common myths about disability that accompany them: like healing in the Scriptures and in churches, the resurrection/eschatology (heaven, the world to come, the Kingdom), among many others.

Disability and Theology
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Cody Bivins-Starr

Discussion:

If comfortable, what are some of the things you were taught about disability growing up, or even still (whether you are a person with disability or not)?

What are some things that come to mind when you think of the phrase “the Christian life?” How might different persons with various disabilities (or yourself!) fit or not fit into that image?

If you are a person with disabilities, and are comfortable sharing, what are some ways which Christian churches have mirrored the dominant culture rather than being an alternative to it?

What are some of your hopes for this class?

Further Sources for Session One:

- *Disability: Living into the Diversity of Christ's Body* – Brian Brock
- *Disability and the Way of Jesus: Holistic Healing in the Gospels and the Church* – Bethany McKinney Fox
- *The Disabled God* – Nancy Eisland
- *Disability and the Church* – Lamar Hardwick
- *The Birth of the Clinic* – Michel Foucault
- *Decarcerating Disability* – Liat Ben-Moshe